

March 3, 2022

Dear Chairman McCrory, Chairman Sanchez, Ranking Member Berthel, Ranking Member McCarty, Vice Chairs, and distinguished members of the committee,

My name is Gloria Niederer and I am a lifetime resident of Norwalk and a parent to two sons who attend Norwalk Public Schools. I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of H.B. 5283.

I am testifying in support of this bill because we need to ensure that all students have access to the resources necessary to support FAPE - a free and appropriate public education - regardless of race, ability, socio-economic status, or residential address. Of Norwalk's almost 12,000 students, 74% identify as students of color (BIPOC), and according to the State Department of Education, Norwalk allocates \$19,770 per pupil spending, while 68% of our students are identified as high needs. To put it simply, Norwalk Public Schools is serving a large community with a large variety of high needs, and we have essentially been forgotten and/or marginalized by every one of you. It must end now.

If we were to compare to our neighboring towns, such as Wilton and Darien, which allocate over \$22,000 per pupil spending and roughly 20% of their student population are high needs, the disproportionality of funding in relation to need between these towns and Norwalk is quite striking and unfathomable that it is happening in the United States. Norwalk's unique issues, from the high percentage of high needs students and the welcoming of many immigrants into our city as a result of answering the appeal of our governor, has left us with more than we can financially handle without putting the city in financial ruin.

In addition to the disadvantages Norwalk students are already facing, the town is set to lose its Alliance District status. This means that while our school district is performing better than before, and has outperformed the metrics of the program, this results in a gradual decrease of funds received annually. Year after year, our students have been improving and our community, teachers, and administrators have increased our ability to meet each student's individual needs and give them the resources to prosper. The loss of this funding only puts that progress in greater jeopardy. What should our children think about themselves if they see services and supports removed for financial reasons, and feel that they are not worthy enough for their government to invest in their efforts?

The COVID-19 pandemic even further highlighted the funding gap. We've seen firsthand the impact the pandemic has had on our students and community. A recent Norwalk survey done in 2021, showed that almost half (46.2%) of our high school students reported experiencing depression or symptoms of depression, which is 15% percent higher than the 2019 statewide high school rate, identified by the CT Youth Risky Behavior Survey. Personally, my 5th grade son has been expressing increased anxiety and feelings of depression, despite our ability to maintain, as best we can, a

“normal” and calming household. With the upcoming loss of ESSER funds, we could see a further reduction in critical mental health support staff when they will be needed the most to curb the impending mental health crisis, especially among our youth. Unfortunately, the Norwalk district was NOT able to use all of its federal dollars to account for these needs, as our district was forced to use much of these funds for regular operating expenses. This is a result of the perpetually unfair ECS formula, even the recent “updated” one that was passed. It was tragic then, and it’s still tragic, and it’s not enough.

I am grateful that this bill recognizes the need to create a more equitable Connecticut. Though this bill alone will not completely close the racial funding gap, it is a necessary start. With all that I have stated, and the fact that our school district is facing a looming threat of the impending federal fiscal cliff due to the loss of ESSER funding, it is imperative that now more than ever, our State right this incessant wrong and bridge this financial gap with the influx of additional funds.

Thank you for your time today. I urge you to support this bill, and keep an open mind and heart to understand the hardships the families of Norwalk are facing.

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